

Supporting Faculty Leaders in Core Course Redesign: Overcoming Challenges and Increasing Buy-In through Faculty Development Retreats at Valdosta State University

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Institutional course redesign is a challenging endeavor. In addition to navigating the logistics associated with improving course content and assessment, strategies to reward faculty who engage in this complex process need to be developed. This case study describes a collaborative summer retreat that was designed at Valdosta State University (VSU) to address the aforementioned challenges. The retreat incorporated development of a course redesign and assessment action plan, critical reflection, and practicing implementation, including a persuasive pitch to increase departmental buy-in. Seven faculty from four departments, who were part of the Gateways to Completion (G2C) initiative at VSU, participated in these summer retreats. Retreat participants reported feeling reinvigorated and better equipped to engage their departments in the course redesign process. All plans developed during the summer retreat were successfully implemented and achieved varying levels of buy-in within each department. The retreats and the implementation of course redesign demonstrated the importance of facilitating buy-in at the department level, the importance of rewarding faculty engagement, and the value of collaborative efforts that incorporate administrative guidance and support. The development of these summer retreats laid the groundwork for expansion of course redesign efforts at VSU, which are only one aspect of our student success initiatives.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Redesigning foundational core or gateway courses at the institutional level can be challenging. In some cases, departments may have committees who oversee the design of these classes, but committee members may have different viewpoints that make it difficult to reach a consensus on course design and assessment. Alternatively, individual faculty who teach these courses may informally discuss content, but there may be little organized collaboration; faculty may feel they do not have time to devote to these interactions due to job responsibilities (e.g., teaching load and scholarship expectations) that may lead to time strain and increased stress, and some faculty may also feel that they do not have the expertise in the area of course redesign and assessment. In addition, getting buy-in from the various faculty stakeholders associated with a course can be difficult if faculty perceive that their academic freedom is threatened, there is departmental inertia, or there are conflicting ideas about the pedagogy of gateway courses or disagreement about the content and skills that students should master by the end of the term. Therefore, it is not only course content and assessment that need to be considered when redesigning core or gateway classes, but methods to increase buy-in and strategies to reward faculty who engage in course innovation need to be developed. At Valdosta State University (VSU), the Gateways to Completion (G2C) coordinators and the director of the Center for Excellence in Learning & Teaching (CELT) collaborated to create and facilitate G2C Faculty Development Summer Retreats to overcome the aforementioned hurdles. Objectives of the retreat included describing and identifying strategies for faculty to engage in course redesign and innovation, finalizing a G2C core curriculum and assessment plan, and critically reflecting on and practicing implementation of a pitch to persuade stakeholders to increase buy-in. This case study shows how the retreat addressed obstacles and met its objectives, resulting in G2C faculty from four different departments (Math, History, Chemistry, English) making significant progress in redesign of gateway courses.

METHODS

The G2C coordinators and the director of CELT collaborated to create and facilitate three separate G2C Faculty Development Summer Retreats during May and June of 2019. Participation of faculty was voluntary, and to reward faculty for their time and effort, funding from CELT provided a stipend of \$600 to each faculty participant, and one G2C coordinator who was also a retreat facilitator on a 10-month faculty contract received a \$2,000 stipend. Because faculty have additional job and personal responsibilities in the summer such as summer teaching, childcare, and other family responsibilities, the retreats were planned around faculty schedules, which resulted in the development of two versions of the retreat (a two-full day retreat and a four-half-day retreat, both of which totaled 12 hours). Objectives of the retreat included describing and identifying strategies for faculty to engage in course redesign and innovation, finalizing a G2C core curriculum and assessment plan, and critically reflecting on and practicing implementation with a pitch to persuade stakeholders to increase buy-in. An active-learning approach was utilized throughout the retreat and included brainstorming activities, individual written reflections, think-pair-share activities, goal setting, resource mapping, persuasive speech writing and role playing to enable faculty to develop and practice an action plan to achieve buy-in within their departments, and time with fellow faculty to develop course innovations and assessment plans and consult with retreat facilitators (Table A). At the end of the retreat, participant feedback was requested using an anonymous online survey to solicit qualitative feedback from faculty who participated in CELT programming.

Table A: Two-day Retreat Detailed Schedule. The four-day retreat is not shown, but the same activities were conducted over four days from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. with lunch provided each day.

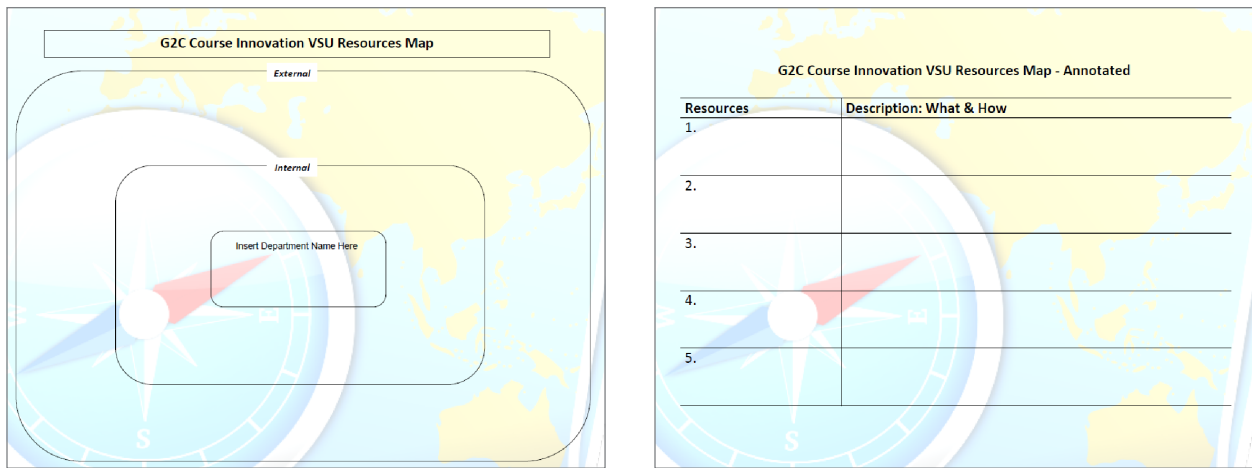
Day 1	
Welcome and overview	
9:00-9:15am	Overview of schedule and learning outcomes for the retreat (coffee and breakfast are served)
Strategies for faculty engagement with course innovation and assessment	
9:15-9:30am	Facilitator asks participants: "What motivates faculty to engage in course design and innovation?"; faculty brainstorm and share their ideas. Facilitator asks participants to categorize their ideas as either a) skills needed for faculty to engage in course innovation or b) strategies to influence their peers to engage in course innovation.
9:30-10:10am	Facilitator shares research about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, competence, risk-taking, collaboration, autonomy of choice, and ownership (20 min) followed by reflection and guided discussion when participants compare what they predicted to what is in peer-reviewed literature ¹ . Included in this discussion is asking participants which factors or characteristics pertain to their departmental faculty (20 minutes).
Identifying Internal and External Resources within and outside the department, respectively	
10:10-10:50am	Participants are given an organizational chart of the institution and a blank resource 'map' (Figure 1) and asked "Who (internal to the department and external to the department) do you need help from in order to engage your departmental faculty in course innovation?". The faculty discuss and complete the map by identifying the individuals they will need access to, a brief description of expectations of how they can help, and the need that is expected to be fulfilled.
Reflection	
10:50-11:15am	Discussion: What was a light bulb moment for you this morning? If there wasn't an 'ah-ha' moment, were there certain aspects of this morning that were particularly useful or any that were not? Why?
Lunch (11:15-12:00)	

¹Stupnisky, R.H., BrckaLorenz, A., Yuhas, B., & Guay, F. (2018). Faculty members' motivation for teaching and best practices: Testing a model based on self-determination theory across institution types. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 53, 15-26.

G2C–Core Curriculum Course Innovation and Assessment Plan	
12:00-12:20pm	Question and Answer Session: Participants explain their current sketch of their course innovation and assessment plan, and facilitators ask questions as appropriate.
12:20-12:30pm	Decision time: Participants decide whether they want to continue to work on their plan, develop a new idea, or migrate to or merge with other departmental initiatives.
12:30-2:30pm	Work Time: Faculty work on plans with facilitators providing assistance as needed.
Strategies for faculty engagement with course innovation and assessment	
Break (2:30-2:45pm)	
Goal Setting	
2:45-3:00pm	Faculty are asked to set focused goals for Day 2, specifically to define the part(s) of the plan that will be finalized tomorrow and include specifics (e.g., whether it is a specific amount of the plan that will be written, or a specific activity that will be designed. These goals are shared with the facilitators who support and affirm what participants say.
Day 2	
Welcome and Questions	
9:00-9:15am	Introduction to the goals for the day and clarify topics or answer questions from Day 1 as necessary (coffee and breakfast are served)
G2C–Core Curriculum Course Innovation and Assessment Plan	
9:15-9:45am	Facilitator asks faculty to link the areas of influence and support from resources on campus to the proposed course innovations. The specific questions are asked: “How will other faculty within the department be engaged?” and “What resources may be useful to use?”.
9:45-11am	Faculty work on the assessment of their course innovations, including Student Assessment of Learning Gains (SALG).
Reflection	
11:00-11:15am	Discussion: What was a light bulb moment for you this morning? If there wasn't an ‘a-ha’ moment, were there certain aspects of this morning that were particularly not useful? Why?
Lunch (11:15am-12:00pm)	
Persuasion and Implementation of Plan	
12:00-12:15pm	Facilitator introduces persuasion and implementation activity. Specifically, faculty determine a plan to explain their plan and achieve buy-in of a target audience. They will also identify the occasion (where and when) and two counter arguments in anticipation of non-supportive or non-affirmative reactions.
12:15-12:45pm	Faculty work on persuasive speaking script.
12:45-1:15pm	Faculty deliver their persuasive speaking script to the facilitators who role play as their colleagues. A Q&A session follows with the facilitators providing faculty feedback on their persuasive script.
Break (1:15-1:20pm)	
Critical Reflection	
1:30-2:00pm	Facilitator starts the final reflection by reminding faculty of retreat learning outcomes, and faculty are asked to think about what they have accomplished during this retreat and are given the questions of “What are two main takeaways from this retreat that will help you successfully implement the plan?”, “What campus resources will help you overcome hurdles in implementing this plan?”, and “What are your next action steps following this retreat?”. Discussion follows.
2:00-3:00pm	This time is set aside for additional work on course innovation plan or any questions that may have arisen during the final critical reflection.

Figure 1

Resource Map to Identify Resources Internal and External to the Department



OUTCOMES

Three separate retreats were held with seven G2C faculty participants from four different departments (Chemistry, Math, English, and History). This level of participation already demonstrates a positive outcome and is likely due in large part to providing faculty with stipends and strategically planning the timing of the retreats around faculty summer schedules. Feedback collected via CELT's feedback form reveals additional benefits of the G2C Faculty Development Summer Retreat, ranging from a better understanding of G2C goals and having time to focus on completing G2C assessment plans, to feeling motivated to continue to innovate and improve teaching. By the start of the Fall 2019 semester, all retreat participants developed teaching and assessment strategies for their gateway courses, discussed the plan to achieve departmental buy-in, and the course redesign plans were put into action with the following results.

English

The G2C English faculty first discussed with the department head the benefits of implementing course redesigns that were identified by a department-focused learning community that occurred the preceding spring semester. The redesign recommendations were then discussed by the entire English department at which time it was decided to implement portions of the redesign on a staggered timeline. The redesign, for both the writing composition and literature courses, focused on instructor-level elements that included a syllabus statement describing the purpose and relevance of the course, assignment justifications for each major assignment, and the expectation of faculty to provide feedback to students on a major assignment within the first six weeks of the course (writing composition) or to incorporate a metacognitive activity into the course (literature).

Math

The G2C mathematics faculty discussed the redesign and assessment plans with the relevant departmental committees. As a result, the committees developed plans to implement elements of the course redesign in stages. During the staggered implementation plan, the mathematics department worked on several related initiatives that gave faculty the opportunity to align G2C strategies with system-level initiatives and apply the strategies enhanced and/or developed during the summer retreat, such as the development of a non-science major core curriculum mathematics course.

History

The G2C history faculty member presented the course redesign findings during a departmental faculty meeting. After discussion, the department decided that the results from the initial course redesign did not appear to be significant and that the passing rate for history courses was satisfactory. Therefore, the history department did not adopt the course redesign for all sections of the redesigned course. However, there were some aspects of the course redesign, including the incorporation of additional low stakes review opportunities, that were explored for use by the entire department because these elements appeared to help students successfully complete history courses. The department also discussed strategies for streamlining the reporting of course innovations implemented by faculty and the related outcomes.

Chemistry

The G2C chemistry faculty also presented their redesign results during a departmental faculty meeting and the department discussed how the strategies that were implemented in the redesigned course could be implemented in additional courses. Based on this discussion, the department agreed to continue to monitor the impact of the revisions to the lab manual and lecture content that were designed to help students improve their comprehension of specific concepts that students historically had not reached the level of expected level of mastery as indicated by assessment data. In addition, the department began discussion on how to apply similar redesign strategies to the next course in the sequence.

Overall

Although levels of buy-in varied across the departments that were associated with the G2C initiative, generally each department showed a commitment to continue to explore the implementation of course innovations in their gateway and foundational courses. However, each department was unique with respect to the level of commitment to implement course redesign strategies across all or multiple sections of the same course. Despite these varying outcomes there is at least anecdotal support that attending the summer retreat provided G2C faculty with the tools they needed to be able to increase departmental buy-in and to engage their department in the redesign process.

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

The planning and implementation of this retreat purposely focused on continued expansion of course innovation practices at VSU. First, in preparation for the retreat, the course assessment plan and report form was standardized, so that it could be used for multiple purposes including: i) core course assessment that is required by Valdosta State University's Office of Institutional Effectiveness, ii) assessment initiatives that departments choose to undertake for gateway courses, and iii) assessment of upper level courses in the curriculum of any major at VSU when new learning goals are developed or new activities and assignments are designed. While a form to use for planning and reporting assessment data was developed and used during this retreat, the University went through SACSCOC accreditation in 2020-2021, and to maintain consistency in assessment data included in the accreditation self-study, this new assessment procedure was not adopted. In addition, the University System of Georgia is in the process of revising its core curriculum, and once this revision is complete, this form will be aligned with the new core curriculum. Moving forward, the expectation is that a single form for multiple assessment purposes will reduce confusion, increase efficiency, and serve as a learning tool for faculty who are involved with course redesign and assessment. Secondly, while a second retreat was planned for Summer 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted priorities for the University, and the retreat was not held. However, resources that were created during the retreat, such as creating a collection of literature on faculty motivations for course redesign and innovation, have been (and will continue to be) shared by the CELT director during CELT programming and university-wide meetings and future retreats.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

The G2C Faculty Development Summer Retreats that are described in this case study were developed to address often overlooked obstacles of why faculty do not engage in course redesign and innovation. Without first addressing these challenges, course redesign at the course, department, or institutional level may not be successful because of insufficient buy-in, lack of a clear understanding of initiative purpose, or inexperience of assessment design and reporting of the faculty. Offering different versions of a faculty development program to meet faculty where they are in terms of scheduling, experience, and individualized needs is important for success. Furthermore, the planning and implementation of the retreat revealed the need for guidance, support, and expertise of academic affairs administrators and teaching center staff. This case study is a testimony to what can be achieved as a result of the grit and perseverance of a few faculty who are committed to finding ways to enhance student success at their institution. These faculty retreats are one of many elements of our G2C journey that have laid a firm foundation for the continued design, implementation, assessment, and continued improvement of strategies that assist students in successfully achieving their curricular and co-curricular goals at VSU and beyond. Ultimately, the G2C Faculty Development Summer Retreats held at Valdosta State University are promising models for other institutions to consider implementing on their campus.